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ARE FAST OR SLOW STEAMERS THE SAFEST?

It seems not unlikely that within a year the fastest steamers now on the Atlantic, such as the "Umbria" and the "Etna," will cease to hold their pre-eminence in the matter of speed, and that the time of the passage between New York and Queenstown will be reduced by at least twenty-four hours, making it just one-half what it was when the old "Scotia" represented the minimum. The quickest passage on record now is a little over six days, and we have the authority of the most successful of modern shipbuilders for saying that the only question whether this can be surpassed or not is the question of expense; that there are no natural or scientific obstacles to still more wonderful achievements; and that the chief thing which shipbuilders and ship-owners have to consider is whether a higher rate of speed will be profitable. Meanwhile, many passengers who cross the ocean, glad as they may be to curtail the tedium and distress which are so often inseparable from the most luxurious and expeditious navigation, look with no little misgiving on the velocity of those so-called "ocean greyhounds," and are yet more apprehensive of proposed attempts to accelerate them. To make the passage in six days a steamer has to maintain, day after day, night after night, without break or intermission, a speed little lower than the average of the express trains which run between the East and the Pacific. Does not this expose her to imminent peril from collision and in approaching the coast? Does it not deprive her of any chance of avoiding an obstacle in her path? The partial knowledge of the subject possessed by landsmen disposes them to look upon slow steamers as the safest, and the tortoise and the hare again start out to adorn the debate. The ill-fated "Oregon," of the Cunard line, is remembered. Would that splendid ship have been lost as she was had it not been for the extraordinary speed at which she was traveling? The commanders of the principal

steamers on the Atlantic are almost unanimously in favor of fast ships, however, as the following replies to a question addressed to a number of them show :

“After an experience of 585 passages across the Atlantic, I am decidedly in favor of fast steamers, both on account of their safety and comfort, and I will as briefly as possible give my reasons.

“First, if you have a danger to encounter, the sooner you get over it the better, and if one steamer takes seven and another ten days to cross the Atlantic, it is evident that you have three more days of risk in the slower ship.

“Secondly, a fast steamer will run through a gale of wind and reach fine weather much quicker than a slow one, and the same holds good in regard to banks of fog. Unless there is ice in the vicinity, I always maintain that it is the safest plan to run through a fog bank as speedily as you can.

“Thirdly, if a collision takes place between two vessels, you may depend upon it that the one going fastest will sustain the least damage.”

SAMUEL BROOKS,
Commander of the Guion Line Steamer “Arizona.”

“I, for one, would not like to say, after my forty years’ experience, which is the safer. There can be no question that the less time on the voyage the less risk. In event of a collision between a slow steamer and a fast one, I should prefer to be on the fast one; but in the event of striking ice, rocks, or a sand bank, I say take the slow one, and the slower the ship the better.”

HAMILTON PERRY,
Late Commander White Star Line Steamer “Britannic.”

“In my mind there is no question as to the greater safety of a fast and powerful steamer over a slow one. In cases of necessity, such as fog on the coast or ice in the ice track, you can reduce

the speed of the fast ship to any degree. In all other cases high speed and power are sources of safety. For instance, if in making a passage you are warned by a rapidly falling barometer and the veering of the wind that you are approaching unpleasantly near the vortex of a revolving storm, you can quickly run a fast ship into the outer circle and in many cases what might otherwise prove to be a disastrous gale may be transformed into a fair wind. Again, should you be caught in a heavy gale without due warning, the great power of the fast ship renders her a much superior sea boat, inasmuch as with a judicious use of that power you are enabled to keep your ship in the most favorable position all the time, while a ship of small power would be continually falling off and bringing the sea abeam, rendering herself liable to suffer damage about the decks as she came to the wind again. In support of this statement I may mention that I have been for some years in command of the 'Alaska,' during which period I have experienced the heaviest kind of weather, not excluding the late blizzard of March 12th, and yet I have never suffered the slightest damage about the decks, boats, rails, etc.

"In ordinary storms a fast ship will get through the bad weather in half the time a slow one will, and in dull, cloudy weather, such as one meets at certain seasons of the year for days together without sun, moon, or stars, a fast ship from her greater speed will be able to make safer and more direct courses than the slow one. In making land you are often able to save your daylight by a fast ship, and in making port you may save the tide and enter when a slow ship would have to anchor outside and face all the contingencies that might arise in that period. I quote these instances to show why I am so fully convinced in my own mind that the fast ship is so much safer than the slow one, and that in the former the risk is minimized to passengers, crews, owners, and underwriters."

GEORGE MURRAY,
Commander Guion Line Steamer "Alaska."

"I am of the opinion that the fast steamer is the safest. Wherever there is danger the sooner you are out of it the better. By exercising care in foggy weather, and slowing down to a moderate

speed, you have the same degree of safety as a slow ship, and a great advantage over her when it clears. On the other hand, we are more exposed, making two passages for a slow ship's one. But taking the two making the same voyage, the fast ship has decidedly the advantage."

WILLIAM McMICKAN,
Commander Cunard Steamer "Umbria."

"Speed on the Atlantic, or, indeed, on any sea, is a much-vexed question, and you have so many conflicting statements on the subject that those who have had no experience find it hard to reconcile the various opinions. According to my judgment, a steamer of great speed is safer than one of small power.

"First, in case of bad weather, fast ships can keep head up to the wind and sea, and so be in the best and safest position for meeting the high waves we so often encounter during the heavy gales on the Atlantic. Their speed can always be regulated according to the height of the waves and the severity of the storm. It is also to be said of fast ships that they are a shorter time at sea, and the dangers of the ocean are of less duration with them than with the slow ships. Ships of very moderate and small power are never so safe as their faster sisters in bad weather. For example, a steamer that goes nine knots in fine weather would find it hard to keep her head up to the gale in boisterous weather, especially if she were lightly loaded, and would be in danger of falling into the trough. A fast ship is also better going before the gale, as there is little chance of her being pooped, that is, swamped by a following sea."

ARTHUR W. LEWIS,
Commander Inman Line Steamer "City of Chester."

"Strength and stability being equal, the fast steamer has a great advantage over her slow neighbor in many ways; but the handling and sailing of fast vessels require not only considerable training but a constitutional aptitude, so to speak, for that special work."

HORATIO MCKAY,
Commander Cunard Steamer "Servia."

“In March, 1871, when the steamers of the White Star Line first started, they were looked upon as vessels altogether faster than safety demanded, and many people predicted that the line would soon come to an end through disasters caused by collisions. They have now been running seventeen years and show a record second to none for freedom from collision. When the ‘*Britannic*’ and ‘*Germanic*’ first came out they were looked upon as marvels of speed, and notwithstanding the success of previous ships on our line fears were entertained that such speed would be dangerous and that collisions would certainly occur. As time passed on and passage after passage was made with such precision that almost the hour of arrival could be accurately determined, and as no accident happened, the confidence of the public was gained, and travelers who suffered from that dreadful affliction, seasickness, were only too glad to take passage by them and thereby reduce their misery by twenty-four or thirty-six hours. Both ships are still running, and with the exception of the collision between the ‘*Britannic*’ and the ‘*Celtic*’ in May, 1887, they have been clear of accidents and are among the most successful ships afloat. I made one hundred and thirteen round voyages (two hundred and twenty-six passages) in command of the ‘*Germanic*’ in eleven years and six months, and during that time not one collision occurred. Previous to taking her I commanded the ‘*Baltic*’ for nearly three years with the same result.

“Since the advent of the ‘*Britannic*’ and ‘*Germanic*’ the Cunard, Inman, Guion, French and North German Lloyd lines have all built ships superior in size and speed to the two former, and the eight and nine day passages of the White Star steamers have been reduced to six days and a half by the ‘*Etruria*’ and the ‘*Umbria*’ of the Cunard line. The French and North German Lloyds have reduced theirs from ten and eleven days to about seven, and without any serious disaster. These facts most clearly demonstrate to the traveling public the fact that the increase of speed in the passenger steamers of the present day has not caused an increase of danger, and that they are quite as safe as the slow steamers of the past.

“It is hardly necessary for me to say how important it is that fast ships should be commanded by competent men—men who are careful and watchful; for as the size and power of a steamer are increased, so ought to be the vigilance and responsibility of the

captain. His duties, while on board his ship, are endless, and considering the number of lives and the immense amount of valuable property intrusted to him, it is not to be wondered at that his countenance is stern, and his manner perhaps not as agreeable as it might be if he were at a dinner party. Passengers who call the captain 'Bear' should take these facts into consideration, and respect him accordingly.

"Although the speed of passenger steamers has been increased, very little has been done in providing them with suitable sound signals for use in foggy weather, however. Several different codes have been laid before the English Board of Trade and the admiralty, but although the necessity of such signals has been proved and strongly advocated by seafaring men, none has been adopted. The different steamship companies acknowledge the necessity of such signals, and would willingly use them as an additional factor in promoting the safety of their ships; but as the Board of Trade has made no move in that direction, it is useless to adopt them unless they can be enforced generally. The international rules are to-day (with the exception of one or two slight changes) the same as they were years ago, and when in a fog the only means a commander has of making known his approach to another vessel is the single blast of the steam whistle, which conveys no information regarding the course he is steering. The codes I allude to give certain blasts for each point of the compass, so that a vessel using one of them can indicate to an approaching vessel the course she is steering, thereby avoiding all danger of collision. If a code were adopted and made compulsory on board all steamers, the ocean voyage would be relieved of a peril much more serious than any arising from a high rate of speed. Had such a code been in use on board the 'Britannic' and the 'Celtic' the collision between those ships would never have occurred."

CHARLES W. KENNEDY,

Late Commander of the White Star Steamer "Germanic."

"My opinion is that while extremely fast ships lessen the duration of dangers, they augment the number of dangers."

C. FRANGEUL,

Commander French Line steamer "La Bourgogne."

"Without entering into long comparisons between slow and fast steamers, I may say, briefly, that I think the fast steamer safer than the slow one. She is a shorter time on the ocean, and the chances of accident are thus diminished. The personal interest of the captain and officers in her is greatly enhanced."

TH. DE JOUSSELM,

Commander French Line steamer "*La Bretagne*."

"The Board of Trade commanding and regulating most of our actions at sea, has come to the conclusion (no doubt gathered from the experience of many men) that a slow rate of speed is safest in foggy weather, and, therefore, I try as nearly as possible to carry out its idea, so as to escape unfavorable comments in case of an accident.

"When a ship is approaching land and sounding constantly, a low rate of speed is, no doubt, best, since, should you be in error it might prevent you from becoming a total wreck. Again when a ship is in the vicinity of ice floes and bergs a low rate of speed is advisable, as it also is when a thick gale or beam wind is blowing, preventing your whistle from being heard any distance ahead. But in an ordinary fog I argue that full speed is the safest, and my reasons are these: If you slow down the moment fog comes on the steam roars out of the escape pipes with such a noise that for some time you are in absolute danger, not being able to see or hear anything; if you reduce the steam gradually you take power off your ship and pressure off your whistle, and if you suddenly hear some sound ahead you can only turn to the right or left slowly or stop altogether, letting the other ship take her chances of clearing you. Again you cannot reverse full speed, as your steam is too low to move the engines quickly. Now, going full speed all is as still and as quite as the grave. Ears and good look-outs are ready for the least sound. The moment you hear a sound, up helm and bring the horn or whistle abaft your beam, which is comparatively a place of safety, and blow once or twice to the other steamer, indicating to him whether you have directed your own ship to the port or starboard.

"The greatest trouble I find in foggy weather is the dislike many commanders of the smaller steamers have to sounding their fog signals. Some say, 'O, you can see farther than you can hear.'

Others say, 'O, the fog will clear down. So don't disturb the passengers.' Others, 'O, once in two minutes is quite often enough.' I maintain that a whistle should be religiously sounded at least every minute, and oftener if necessary, but never less."

FRANK S. LAND,

Commander Inman Line Steamer "City of Berlin."

The commander of a White Star steamer, who does not wish his name to be published, writes :

"As a matter of fact the whole question: 'Are fast or slow steamers the safest,' resolves itself into a question of fogs, for, due vigilance being always exercised by the commander and his officers, that is where the real danger lies. We hear of vessels such as the 'City of Brussels' being run down when stopped or at anchor, and we hear of other cases where serious calamity has been avoided, simply and solely by reason of the high speed of the meeting vessels. A fog is the most treacherous and dreaded of all the sailor's enemies.

"Again, what is to be done when instructions vary so much? According to the Government (Board of Trade) regulations, commanders are instructed to go slow in a fog, and yet another department of the Government (the Post-Office) comes forward offering a premium on fast passages. The mails are given to the steamers which make the shortest passages, be the weather fair or foul and the risks what they may; with such matters, of course, the Post-Office officials have nothing to do!"

Another commander in the White Star Line, who also wishes to be unknown, writes :

"Your question might be divided thus: Is it safer to go through fogs as quickly as possible, or by going slower and keeping your vessel more under control, as far as reducing her headway is concerned, are you less liable to accidents? I think it is generally acknowledged among seamen that the former is the wiser course, especially with large steamers supplied with steam steering gear, as the greater the speed the quicker the vessel will turn in

answer to her helm. You must also remember that with a fast steamer you are a much shorter time in a region of fog than with a slow steamer.

“Indeed, to my mind there is quite as much danger going slow as going fast. Then as to approaching land at a high rate of speed : this is said to be dangerous ; but since Sir William Thomson invented his patent sounding machine, soundings can be taken when a ship is going at any speed.

“The safety of steamers going at a great speed cannot be better demonstrated I believe than by a reference to the Holyhead and Dublin mail steamers. These are among the fastest vessels in the world, making a speed of nearly twenty knots, or twenty-two and a half miles per hour ; but though they have to cross the track of all vessels bound up the Irish Sea accidents to them are almost unheard of. Passengers may always rest assured of their safety in a first-class, well regulated steamer, should she be going fast or slow, and may relieve their minds of all anxiety, confident that every precaution which skill and experience can suggest is being taken.”

The opinions of some of the principal ship builders were also sought, and among the replies received was this from Messrs. James and George Thomson, the builders of some of the most celebrated of the Cunard ships and also of the two new Inman ships which are expected to “break the record :”

“In our opinion, if proper attention be given to the steering power of the ship, a fast ship, in the hands of an able commander, is more able to avoid collision than a slow ship. On account of the shorter time a fast ship is at sea, as well as the shorter time she is in the vicinity of another ship, she is less liable to be in danger of collision, and even when in danger we think she is more able to avoid it. But we would point out that the question of safety is not wholly dependent on avoiding collisions, and that if proper structural arrangements are made a ship may be as safe after a collision as before it. In reply to your question, however, we may say that the fastest ships on the Atlantic are the safest in our opinion.”

JAMES AND GEORGE THOMSON.

Perhaps it is because the obvious is so apt to escape us that the point oftenest reiterated in these communications comes with an undue freshness of conviction to the landsman, *i. e.*, that dangers are usually in proportion to the length of time a ship is at sea, and that, therefore, a fast ship is safer than a slow one, because the period of her exposure is of briefer duration.

But though there is a remarkable unanimity of opinion in favor of fast ships, the reasons given for the preference are not always sound, nor do they in all cases accord with what one might desire in the interest of humanity. If, for instance, a fast ship runs out of an area of fog or storm sooner than a slow ship, is it not true that the superiority of speed which enables her to do this also allows her to reach another such area which would cease to exist, perhaps, before her tardier competitor could reach it. Let us say that the "Alaska" encounters a heavy gale on the banks on a Sunday, when she is in company with a slower ship. She has run out of it by Monday morning, while the other ship has to struggle through it several hours longer. On the following Wednesday the "Alaska" meets another gale, and has to bear all the force of it, but by the time the slow ship reaches it, it has moderated or blown itself out. Possibly it may be said in answer to this that still another storm might overtake the laggard, which the fast ship being so many miles ahead would be able to avoid; but chances of this kind do not afford any secure basis for a positive assertion. Again, though it may be a selfish, not to say inhuman consideration, it is undeniably comforting to the passenger by a fast steamer to be assured that in event of a collision his vessel is less likely to be damaged than a slow one. But this also seems to be a fallacious assumption. If the fast ship runs into another ship, fast or slow, she will probably cut her down and escape with comparatively little injury. What, however, if she herself is struck amidships, or in any vital part? Her speed cannot save her then, but on the contrary, it is likely to augment the proportions of the disaster.

Aside from a few such fallacies as we have indicated, the testimony of the distinguished seamen, who have been good enough to communicate their opinions, demonstrates satisfactorily that a passenger on board a very fast steamer is quite as safe as on a very slow one. Speed does not necessarily increase peril. Summing up the evidence we find that the ship of great power

not only diminishes the period of exposure to such dangers as there may be in the transatlantic voyage, but that she is also better fitted for meeting those dangers.

Fast ships are superior as sea-boats to ships of smaller power, more easily handled in fogs and heavy weather, despite their enormous size, and, as Captain Murray of the "Alaska" points out, their speed often enables them to make land by daylight, and to save tides, when slower ships would have to approach a treacherous coast at night, and anchor outside the harbor while waiting for a tide. The maximum of speed has certainly not yet been reached. In all probability the "City of New York" and the "City of Paris," which Messrs. James and George Thomson are building for the Inman Line, will surpass all that has heretofore been done, and they in turn may be left behind by still newer ships. Such extraordinary speed unquestionably calls for extraordinary vigilance on the part of the officers, and it is pleasant to note that in the new Inman ships several unique features are being introduced, which it is believed will make them unsinkable.

WILLIAM H. RIDEING.